

No Joke: Trump and Humor

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My reflections on the role of humor in the past election and its aftermath were triggered by a comment made by writer and comedian Judd Apatov, who suggested that the outcome of the election wasn't a surprise to him because he had been saying all along that the funnier candidate always wins: "I said it as a joke, but I think there's something to it. Reagan was funny. Bill Clinton was funny. Bush was funnier than Gore. Obama was funnier than probably anybody who's ever run for office. Even though the president-elect rarely laughs and has a demented sense of humor, Trump is way funnier than Hillary Clinton."¹ Leaving aside the problem that in the United States, the personal likeability of a candidate is widely considered a key factor in the presidential race, which strikes me as misguided and rather absurd, I want to take seriously Apatov's claim that Trump is funny and examine one of his most outrageous jokes. It came up on several occasions and most prominently in a 1997 interview on *The Howard Stern Show*, where Trump linked avoiding sexually transmitted diseases to serving in the Vietnam War. Referring to the perilous traps of "vaginas," which Stern jokingly compares to "landmines," Trump describes his personal sex life during the 1980s as "scary. It's like Vietnam. It is my personal Vietnam. I feel like a great and very brave soldier."²

Trump's joke epitomizes what Freud in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* defines as a *tendentious* joke.³ It is both hostile (serving the purpose of aggressiveness) and obscene (serving the purpose of exposure), as it directs aggression at and threatens the exposure of two targets simultaneously. On the one hand, Trump's analogy aims at (sexually active and liberated)

women, and in particular female sex workers who are indeed at an increased risk of getting STDs because they are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors. The other targets of Trump's analogy are Vietnam veterans who survived a war because of some combination of luck and/or bravery in action. Given that Trump successfully dodged military draft at age twenty-two because of bone spurs in his heels, his joke takes on an added, hidden level of meaning. Exposing his own sexual libertarianism, he builds himself up as much as he puts himself down—projecting his victory over the threat of the vagina dentata and his superiority over the American war hero.

The joke is also a good example for smut, which Freud defines as an act of aggression originally addressed towards a “sexually different person” (usually a woman) in the service of seduction.⁴ Freud stresses the importance of a third party, “another man,” whose presence conditions the smut, especially when the woman, feeling ashamed, does not yield to the attempt at seduction: “When the first person finds his libidinal impulse inhibited by the woman, he develops a hostile trend against that second person and calls on the originally interfering person as his ally.”⁵ Freud also concedes that at higher social levels “the presence of a woman brings the smut to an end,” as men are forced to save it up “till they are ‘alone together’.”⁶ Driven by his desire to amuse another man, the first person no longer addresses the woman directly, but instead addresses his male interlocutor(s). This substitution allows his aggressive act to assume the character of a joke, or, in the parlance of Trump and his defenders, of “locker room talk”—smut that is tolerated because the initial target is absent.

Freud also recognizes that tendentious jokes have a cathartic function, particularly when they involve aggression or cruelty. Tendentious jokes make it possible to momentarily overcome repression and circumvent the obstacles of upbringing, education, and society's restrictive morality.⁷ In Freud's work, and in the popular perception, they are associated with the satisfaction of a primary urge and the enjoyment of those subjects of pleasure that are regarded as taboo (i.e. cruelty and obscenity).

This is the background against which we must understand the rather misleading assertions seeking to validate Trump's tendentious jokes as acts of subversion, as defiance against political correctness. Trump of course has repeatedly denounced political correctness, and he relishes posturing as a daring truth-teller who reclaims pleasure from a humorless, repressive society. But what purports to be a courageous act of defiance against the infringement of individual rights, is a false, and worse, an affirmative joke, if we believe Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of humor in the "Culture Industry" fragment of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸ Conjuring up a critique of mass entertainment as mass deception, Adorno and Horkheimer concede that enjoying bourgeois high culture isn't exactly the equivalent of a fun ride at a water park. As Horkheimer and Adorno note: "Baudelaire is as humorless as Hölderlin."⁹ In a later essay, "Is Art Light-Hearted?," Adorno will state that lighthearted humor is the privilege of more innocent times – thereby extending his famous assertion that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.¹⁰ And so Adorno and Horkheimer issue a call to resist the comic mode, and an injunction against laughter, that "sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality".¹¹ This is because to laugh at something just means to disparage it, marking laughter as inhumane and barbaric. Roger Behrens elaborates on this idea when he defines the humor of capitalism as the Schadenfreude over its victims. Schadenfreude refers to a laughter by which the oppressed rejoice in the misery of the other oppressed, thereby affirming that they are in a relationship of competition with each other.¹² This is in line with Freud's understanding of Schadenfreude, which he associates with the laughter of a child who gains pleasure from seeing another child make a mistake that he has successfully avoided.¹³ It is a resentful humor by which we attack that which is like us precisely because it reminds us of ourselves.

What I argue, then, is that Trump's joke about "avoiding STD's being his personal Vietnam" doesn't signify the raucous laughter of the strong man. Instead, I would argue that it exposes a kind of humor that is symptomatic of feelings of inferiority and of fears of emasculation. The root cause of the obscene joke is a prior denial of sexual gratification. Accordingly, the flip side of the

politically incorrect, misogynistic, and supposedly subversive joke is the nostalgia for a time when white male culture was dominant and women were kept (sexually) subordinate and unable to enjoy the kinds of opportunities – and the sexual self-determination – they enjoy today. The laughter it evokes is symptomatic of a belief shared by many Trump supporters who feel economically and culturally left behind after witnessing minorities in general, and women in particular, excel and do better in the competitive race of capitalism than themselves. But it is also a feeling that Trump shares with much of his base. Trump may be filthy rich, and the most powerful man in the Western hemisphere at the moment, but he is nevertheless extremely vulnerable. Not very long ago, Trump was a stock character not taken seriously by the urban, liberal, educated elites who sneer at the tacky tabloid exhibitionist, and who are not impressed by his botched business ventures and gaudy lifestyle. For them, he is an awkward and unlucky schlemiel for whom things never turn out right.

It is certainly gratifying, and actually very easy, to make fun of Trump. His cheap, China-manufactured ties, which he attaches with scotch-tape so that the ends don't flap around, are funny, and so is his gaudy Trump Tower residence, decked out with ostentatious decorations and portraits of its narcissistic owner. Obama made some good jokes about this during the White House Correspondents' dinner of 2011. That night, Trump was the also the butt of jokes by comedian Seth Meyers who joked that "Donald Trump has been saying he'll run for president as a Republican, which is surprising as I just assumed he was running as a joke."¹⁴ While we obviously don't know what he was thinking that night, Trump did look unhappy and humiliated during Meyer's act, which prompted some to say that it triggered some deep yearning for revenge in him.¹⁵ Meyers later apologized to the public. However, he did so not for beating up Trump, but for the fact that his jokes may have led to Trump's running for president.

Trump's presidency has turned me into a comedy junkie, but I concede that my addiction to his public humiliation in various comedy shows makes me complicit with the kind of mean-spirited humor that is also the essence of the

tendentious joke. My liberal laughter at Trump is its own version of plain old Schadenfreude, for how is it different from the affirmative laughter “prescribed by the pleasure industry” in the form of “fun as a medicinal bath”?¹⁶ It certainly isn’t a viable form of resistance. Adorno and Horkheimer write that “Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.”¹⁷ The danger of humor as mass entertainment, whether directed at Donald Duck or “The Donald”, is that it primes us to capitulate to power as something inescapable. Take Meyer’s joke about Trump “running as a joke.” The sad truth here is that this joke isn’t just on Trump but on all of us, and on our democracy, in which the kinds of ideologies that used to drive political discourse and public debate have been replaced by an hyperbolically advanced, mutated form of culture industry that has turned “reality” into mass entertainment and mass entertainment into our new “reality.” The joke isn’t on Trump who ran for president, but on us, who allowed this to happen.

¹ Maureen Dowd, “Judd Apatow Freaking Out Over Donald Trump” *The New York Times*, 14 January, 2017. Web.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/opinion/sunday/judd-apatow-freaking-out-over-donald-trump.html>

² Quoted after Mark Singer, *Trump and Me* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2016), 103.

³ Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,” in S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), VIII: *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1–247, here: 96.

⁴ Freud, “Jokes and their Relation,” 97.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid-Noerr, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁹ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?," *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Shierry Weber-Nicolson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 251.

¹¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 112.

¹² Roger Behrens, *Die Diktatur der Angepassten: Texte zur kritischen Theorie der Popkultur* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003), 216.

¹³ "A child laughs in the same case from a feeling of superiority or from Schadenfreude: 'You've fallen down, I haven't.'" Freud, "Jokes and their Relation," 224.

¹⁴ Dave Itzkoff, "Seth Meyers Confronts the Trump Era on 'Late Night'," *The New York Times*, 25 January, 2017. Web. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/arts/television/seth-meyers-late-night-donald-trump.html?_r=0

¹⁵ Adam Gopnik, "Trump and Obama: A Night to Remember," *The New Yorker*, 12 Sep. 2015. Web. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/trump-and-obama-a-night-to-remember>

¹⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 112.

¹⁷ Ibid., 110.